

Bufalo NY Courier-Express circa 1974 East Rushford Still Traced In Lake Bottom

QUAKER BRIDGE, Onoville, St. Helena and other localities in Western New York vanished under waters that are part of power and flood control projects. East Rushford, in Allegany county, washed out 42 years ago.

Most visitors who climb to the picnic area adjacent to the Rushford dam see only a lake stretching out below, lined by white cottages and evergreen stands.

But Ellsworth Baker, standing on the promontory and looking down into the blue-green depths, used to see something else. Far beneath the ripples was the community where he grew up. He was 82 when he told me about it.

EAST RUSHFORD clustered on the banks of Rush and Cana-dea Creek, which flowed together at the edge of town and then emptied into the Genesee River. Main Street was lined with shade trees and hitching rails. Farmers coming into town would trade at the general store while their grain was being ground at the gristmill. At noon, the sawmill whistle echoed up and down the valley.

Farm wagons and cars rumbled over East Rushford's two bridges. On Sunday, all was quiet there except for church bells. Ellsworth Baker walked barefooted to a one-room school on Rush Creek. He drove his father's team to the gristmill and helped with chores. In 1926, he had his own 65-acre dairy farm east of the hamlet.

Then it was announced that the bottomlands in the valley had been acquired by a Rochester utility which needed a reservoir to store up water for its turbines. More quickly than most residents realized, the work of clearing a four-mile stretch of valley began.

FROM HIS back steps, Ellsworth Baker watched much of the evacuation. First, the condemnation notices went up and X's were scrawled on the houses. Then the houses were torn down. Some of the lumber was salvaged but most was burned, and the air was thick with smoke.

Wrecking crews dismantled the bridges and pulled out utility poles.

Rising waters would cover part of the Baker farm. They would reach up into the meadows. Ellsworth Baker knocked the foundation out from under his cowbarn and installed rollers.

Then he and some neighbors winched that building 70 feet, so it would occupy high ground.

WHEN HIS farm work was caught up, Ellsworth Baker took a job on the dam itself, hauling stone and construction materials.

On a bright spring morning the gates of the dam were closed, shutting off the flow of the two streams. The flats were a wasteland now, with all the trees cut and the cellars filled in. Ellsworth Baker watched the water gather into a little pool at the foot of the dam and then spread out, inching up Main Street, spilling into low spots and then overflowing.

"The last living thing I saw in East Rushford was a woodchuck standing on a tip of ground, looking bewildered," he told me.

RISING WATER created a tiny island out of a corner of his pasture. Part of the lane down which his cows used to walk to that spot was flooded. At first the cows stood in the lake, knee deep and mooing.

Finally, one struck out for the island, five or six rods away. Soon the other cows were swimming in single file, one resting her head on the flanks of the next.

Former villagers used to visit Ellsworth Baker to see his swimming cows and the new lake-front. Sometimes he'd show them around by boat. At its center, the reservoir is 115 feet deep, but along the shallower sections one could peer into the depths and see stone foundations, bridge abutments and even the outline of the old Rush Creek School.

It was a ghostly sight, the image distorted by the water, and viewing the old landmarks like that always made Ellsworth Baker and his friends feel sad.